

Reflection

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Summary: In this world, Team Minato returns as heroes. (This time, there was no disgraced Hatake runt carrying the most prized doujutsu of the famed Uchiha clan, no questions of theft or accusations of treason, no doubts of Minato's abilities as a teacher let alone Hokage, no back-stabbing comrade killers - no Kakashi.)

1. Chapter 1

Set sometime after the Five Kage Summit but before the Fourth Shinobi World War; semi-AU (you'll see later)

* * *

><p>When Kakashi wakes, it's to the dreadfully familiar, water-stained ceiling tiles of a hospital room.<p>

Even before he's fully conscious, he runs through basic self-diagnostic tests - no serious injuries internal or otherwise, sore muscles and nausea rolling in his stomach, chakra coils unburned and chakra reserves somewhat low but better than nothing, wrists and ankles restrained with chakra dampening chains, wearing nothing but a hospital issued shirt and cotton pants, no weapons or gear in sight, and a tightness in his throat and burning in his eyes that he doesn't want to admit are a product of old nightmares.

The smell of antiseptics stings his oversensitive nose and the bright whiteness of everything is eye-watering, but he manages not to panic and instead focuses outwards with more effort, relying less on sharpened instincts and ingrained reflexes to assess his surroundings.

The hustle and bustle of a big city are background noise to the heartbeats and footsteps that periodically pass by his hospital door. A glance outside and a whiff of fresh air streaming from a crack in the window tell him enough, that he is in Konoha (or a very good

genjutsu of one, he's still testing the room with subtle spikes of chakra) and on a higher floor of the main shinobi hospital in the heart of the village. He ignores the strange, lingering scent of incense and saltwater and spice, can't let himself fall into a trap because it smells suspiciously familiar and like something that will break him if he tries to figure it out (but he already knows, he's not one of the best trackers in the nations for nothing after all, and he's also the best at denial so guess which one he chooses to be better at now?) and so he ignores it, deems it unimportant but always in the back of his mind.

The restraints are easy to slip out of, ridiculously so his mind tells him suspiciously, and so is detecting the almost-not-there wisps of not chakra but presence he can sense in the outermost reaches of his senses (ANBU, this is a test, it's always a test, but for now he will not answer for what) and comprehension dawns on him when he nears the exit.

Seals.

Well done seals, by the looks of them, subtly framing the door (and probably window) and etched faintly into the wood with chakra. He doesn't dare prod at them in fear of invoking most likely debilitating consequences, especially if they were made by the person he thinks they were - years of sporadically taking an interested in Jiraiya's seals and then nearly a decade of riding Minato's coattails have taught him this lesson well.

Fortunately, Kakashi has a way around that beneath the eye patch the hospital had so thoughtfully provided him.

A quick Kamui - and missing door - later and he casually slithers away from his prison to a place he can breathe without the deep-seated ache making his muscles tremble, somewhere he could think without a strange fog clouding his mind while another Kakashi lays in his place, solid but as fake and fragile as he feels.

He supposes he could just leave now and give himself a better chance of escaping undetected, but he has important things that have hopefully not been taken to Hokage Tower.

He finds the supply closet used for medical staff to change quickly if they are called to the field and swipes a standard uniform, finds his own things in a locked, sealed, and guarded room in a hidden section of the building (but he's been playing this game for too long, knows this hospital too well, and isn't that just sad - that this hospital-genjutsu-hallucination knows how many times he's been here, how long he's stayed in these rooms and wandered these halls for one reason or another) and meanders the streets with a low-level but effective genjutsu weaving the image of a brown haired, brown eyed man in his place.

He doesn't stop to wave at Asuma. He doesn't stop to gaze at the Hokage Monument or the four faces carved into it. He doesn't stop to wonder why there are so many Uchiha's wandering the districts of Konoha. He doesn't stop to listen to a small family of three with ridiculous hair yelling at each other in a small ramen stand. He doesn't stop to watch a black-haired man with orange goggles get scolded by a petite brunette with purple marks on her cheeks.

He doesn't stop.

He doesn't stop.

He doesn't-

He stops at the memorial stone.

It's no bigger or smaller than he remembers (and he does, he does remember, he will always remember), just as glossy and well-kept in his memories with wilted flowers and crumbling ashes at the base, but the names are different. A different order in some cases, new names he hasn't carved into his memory and names that haven't yet been carved into stone.

The henge fades within the hour, more from lack of care than lack of focus, and ten minutes later the bushin disappears as well. The resulting, panicked spikes of chakra would be amusing if he wasn't sure whether the joke-not-joke would end in grudging laughter or public execution.

It only takes ten minutes after to feel three presences quickly coming his way, intent and strong and alive, and Kakashi has always wanted to apologize to his ghosts but right now it seems impossible. One gets there first and not a few moments later the other two join, and the three land on the edges of the training ground, of their old training ground. Kakashi can't tear his eyes away from the memorial however, has always found resolve and guilt in equal measure etched into the stone but the strength he draws from those feelings fails him now.

His nose itches with the long dead scents of incense, saltwater, and spice but he still doesn't look back until -

A choked, "Kakashi?"

He closes his uncovered eye, takes a deep breath, and turns.

Three ghosts stare back.

* * *

><p>Kakashi has imagined this moment hundreds, realistically thousands, of times, but for some reason it doesn't occur to him that he's never imagined apologizing to them when they look *older*. *He* has the Sharingan, and with the blessing-curse he is always able to recall their young faces perfectly, even in death, and now it's like he doesn't know what to do when looking at them as they would've - should've - been if he hadn't been so -

They're still staring.

Obito is taller, Kakashi notes with a slight edge of hysteria in his thoughts, but not as tall as Kakashi. Why wouldn't he be though? In this world, it seems, Obito lives and grows and becomes the young man Kakashi never gave him the chance to be. Rin too. She barely comes up to Obito's shoulder but is still a head taller than in her youth and he can't stop staring at the blood staining their clothes and faces, the same blood he's never been able to wash from his hands.

Minato-sensei is almost exactly the same as Kakashi remembers except he's breathing. There are lines around his eyes and mouth, extremely faint but present and a result of years of laughter and sorrow Kakashi would never be able to experience at his side.

He wonders what they see. A failure, a shadow, a long-forgotten memory?

"Oi! You bastard, don't ignore me!" Obito shouts, voice cracking with the threat of tears, and the familiar words bring Kakashi back from the sinking depths of his mind just like it always used to before.

The words leave his mouth without much thought, a knee-jerk reaction he hasn't had in over ten years. "Why should I listen to a crybaby ninja?"

The silence that follows is heavy with anticipation and shock until in a flash there are two bodies colliding into him, sending him to the ground in a pained heap of silent tears and ugly crying but he won't say his body is still healing because this, this is the kind of healing he needs even if he will never say out loud. There's dust in his eyes (yes, even the covered one, but the Sharingan has always acted up at random times and this is no different) and his chest feels tight with more than just exhaustion, and he doesn't think he's ever felt better, crushed under the bodies of his two precious teammates, minutes stretching as they struggle to control themselves.

Another flash, this time yellow, stands over him, bright blue eyes glassy as if the skies were about to rain, and Kakashi doesn't imagine how rough his sensei's voice sounds. "Obito, Rin, let him up."

The two are reluctant, and Kakashi also didn't realize how heavy they would be when they grew out of their child bodies (the ones he buried, one casket empty and one casket too light to contain all of one person; then later, much later, one casket too heavy for him to lower himself), but the thought vanishes as soon as Kakashi reaches out to take his sensei's outstretched hand. In no time, he's pulled into strong arms that taught him, lead him, comforted him for years and years before he learned how to accept it.

The hug is crushing but short, not giving Kakashi much time to marvel at the fact that his chin easily hooks over his sensei's shoulder now when at one time he'd thought those shoulders were taller than the Hokage Monument. Even though Minato pulls back first, his hands are like hot iron brands on Kakashi's shoulders as his sensei's bright, bright blue eyes roam over his masked face like he can't believe what he's seeing.

Kakashi knows the feeling.

"When they brought you in, I didn't think-" Minato looks lost, so lost, so much like the teenage jounin unprepared to take a grieving, genius orphan under his wing, and Kakashi knows this is his fault too, "I was so sure they'd be wrong. But Tsunade-sama and Hiashi-san swore that you were-" real, alive, not some fucked up attempt at recreating the Hatake line, "you, and Jiraiya-sensei and Kushina and

I checked the scroll and even had Fugaku-san look it over with his Sharingan and it's real and-

"Breathe, sensei. You're starting to sound like Obito when he's panicking," Kakashi blandly states, enjoying Minato's sharp, startled laugh, looking so surprised and pleased it makes Kakashi want to preen, especially with Obito's spluttering and Rin's giggling right beside him.

Minato's still smiling (and it looks a little like grieving but it's not like Kakashi can judge) at him, rueful this time, "I should've known you wouldn't stay put in the hospital until we could visit."

Obito elbows his way into his line of vision, and for a moment Kakashi sees double - one Obito bloody and young and one not - before his sight rights itself and there's just one Uchiha in front of him, "Yeah, you bastard! You were out for three days! Poor Rin was taking care of you the whole time and hurt her neck sleeping in the chair next to you!"

Kakashi expects Rin to blush and deny it but she does neither, instead eyeing Obito with a sly smile he doesn't remember her ever wearing, "Are you sure that was me, Obito? I don't snore and I remember the nurses complaining that the other patients had a hard time sleeping with all the noise in Kakashi's room."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Obito gapes at her before turning back to Kakashi, eyes still suspiciously watery while a flush worked its way up his neck, so visible with his pale skin, "I wasn't- I didn't! That-"

They continue to snipe at each other teasingly, Minato watching all three of them with an indulgent fondness that Kakashi misses, but the short interaction leaves him feeling off-balance.

Of course. Of course they would grow up. Of course they would stay together.

Of course they would change.

His eyes are quick and assessing as he looks at his three teammates again, this time with more life-hardened scrutiny and less rose-colored remembrance, and feels something like the child of loss and envy curl in his chest at the closeness his team shares now without him.

Minato is still a fearsome Hokage with Obito and Rin as competent Jounin under him, but they are still a team. Kakashi remembers how doggedly Minato had shadowed him after everything, watched over him even with his own grief at losing one then two students, determined not to lose a third, so Kakashi knows the same must've occurred in this world as well. This time, though, Rin hadn't been abducted and killed by her remaining teammate and sensei didn't die on the night of his child's birth, and their bonds are tighter than he could've imagined.

It's a bit jarring, a bit heartbreaking.

But.

He's never been one for dwelling on negative emotions, rarely felt spite and even rarer resentment. His companions are grief and guilt, and those two take up too much of his time for other things like anger or jealousy to really take root (until recently, until he was assigned a team of three that would change his world) and even now those negative, ugly things don't manifest.

Despite not living this life with them, Kakashi is above all thankful that they are more or less happy and together.

"How did you get out of your room, anyhow?" Minato asks, head tilting curiously to the side, and something in Kakashi aches to see so much of his student in his sensei. "I placed seals on every surface so you wouldn't be able to leave. I didn't want you completely restrained in the bowels of the T&I Department so it was the only way to convince the Council you'd be secure. Who, by the way, are going to have my head because of your little stunt." Ugh, the _Council_.

Rin rolls her eyes in obvious contempt, and Kakashi is gratified to find he can read her thoughts easily.

Obito snorts, "You think even your seals could keep _Kakashi_ in the _hospital_? The same Kakashi that snuck out of there with a broken arm and a fever so high we was actually nice to me at training?"

Minato almost pouts and Kakashi despairs at the completely un-Hokage-like expression, "I put seals everywhere though! And I still wanna know what you did with the doorframe, Kashi, Tsunade doesn't like having her hospital damaged like that." His smile turns a little devious when Rin whaps a cackling Obito on the back of the head with a wide grin of her own, so like Naruto and Sakura in that moment Kakashi can't help but feel warm at the sight even as it causes him pain in equal measure

He taps his hitae-ite, slanted over his scarred eye. "I have a few tricks."

The air changes, and the three jounin can pinpoint the moment their bright-like-the-sun sensei becomes the flee-on-sight Yondaime Hokage. Minato's face is almost grave when he looks at Kakashi, and the stinging in his left eye already tells him what this is going to be about.

"Kakashi, while we were able to prove that you're you, just from a different place, we couldn't explain why you have the Sharingan."

Obito and Rin say nothing, expressions dropping from their elated teasing to something more professional but not quite, and Kakashi looks back at the memorial stone he's spent his life apologizing to. He sighs, a sound that feels as heavy as it sounds, and gestures for them to sit in the green grass of their old training grounds.

"Get comfortable. I have a long story to tell."

Again.

* * *

><p>It's as easy as talking to the Memorial Stone.<p>

As he speaks, they stay quiet, as silent as the grave behind him, but unlike the Memorial Stone, they watch him with rapt attention. Here, he can't lie, can't bring himself to weave half-truths and embellished tales when these three deserve all the honesty he can muster no matter how much everything he's learned has taught him to do the opposite. The story is longer, too, much longer than any other he's told to their headstones, and so it comes out as a story - a sad, tragic story that has no business being spoken aloud.

And as familiar as his apologies are, this time he feels raw when he finishes, like someone took a rusted kunai and roughly cut him open, scraping everything out in slow drags. His teammates look no better. Obito had gotten sick exactly twice and Rin wouldn't stop crying halfway through. He doesn't remember Minato ever looking so pale.

He doesn't tell them everything, of course.

They more know of his past, his father, they know everything up to the events of the Kannabi Bridge where their paths diverge-

(here, he is the empty casket because it was him that pushed Obito out of the way of the boulder, his lower body crushed and bleeding out slowly in front of them, slipping away even as Rin pushed herself to exhaustion trying to keep him awake, keep him alive despite the fact that in the end it was he who was left to rot behind enemy lines)

-and how he wasn't there when Rin was abducted because he'd been on trial as a thief and murderer, accused of treason, of being exactly like his father.

He tells them exactly how his Mangekyo Sharingan matches Obito's perfectly, low tenor never wavering despite the cracks he can feel spreading in his chest, but he's not given a chance to apologize and beg for forgiveness because Rin throws herself at him in a fierce, bone-crushing hug that leaves him breathless.

He tries to calm her teary, hysterical "I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry Kakashi-kun" because she has no reason to be sorry so why is she apologizing when he is the murderer? But he's never been able to comfort others, has always been one to stay quiet in the face of sorrow, so he just holds her until she stops shaking, until Obito's pale face cracks with an absolving smile, until Minato bows his head in silent prayer.

He tells them of his years in ANBU where he became less than human, a broken tool that cracked and chipped at every heart he'd crushed, a broken tool that nearly shattered at the death of the Yondaime and his wife. How he'd nearly gone down a dark path with no intention to return, mind poisoned with silky words and warped with promises of justice for his teacher before the Sandaime saved him, from himself and from following a one-eyed thief into the bleak underground.

He keeps going despite the tightness in his throat until they know of the possible threat to the Jinchuriki, the potential identities of the Akatsuki, the greatest war the Five Nations will ever know.

(the grief on their faces is terrible, so terrible, and Kakashi wishes they'd never asked)

There's more, so much more, but he doesn't mention the Kyuubi's attack or the Uchiha Massacre or Madara because it seems they hadn't interfered just yet, doesn't refer to his three students as anything but nameless graduates that happen to pass the bell test. He doesn't have the patience (yes he does) to repeat himself in case they are a threat, needs to wait and wait because he's good at biding his time for an opportunity to present itself and tell the right people at the right time; after all, who can he truly trust in this upside down world?

(maybe Orochimaru wasn't the only snake poisoning Konoha)

In return, he learns that they were able to complete the mission, just like in his world, except Team Minato returns as heroes. And why wouldn't they? This time, there was no disgraced Hatake runt carrying the most prized doujutsu of the famed Uchiha clan, no questions of theft, no doubts of Minato's abilities as a teacher let alone Hokage-

-no Kakashi.

In this world, Obito becomes a kenjutsu master because right before he died, Kakashi had given him his father's tanto, had asked him to become a hero like the White Fang and protect his precious people, and Kakashi feels a pang in his chest seeing his father's weapon so well loved and cared for on Obito's back.

(he remembers feeling it shatter in his hands like his father's legacy, all in the name retribution that didn't satisfy the rage or quench the sorrow)

In this world, Rin is scarred by her inability to save her teammate, so she seeks out the greatest healers known and learns as much as she can, determined to never let it happen again, and once more Kakashi is humbled by the sight of the small medipack she'd given him as a Jounin present hooked to her hip.

(fate is cruel; she knows how what his blood feels like soaking her clothes and he knows what her beating heart feels like in his hand)

In this world, Minato vows to keep his remaining teammates alive, throws everything he has into his sealing, convinced he would've been able to save his first student if he'd been faster, better, smarter, and becomes even more infamous in the art of fuinjutsu than Jiraiya or the Uzumaki Clan with Kushina supporting him - through everything.

(and Kakashi wonders how much support he needed after losing his first and longest student, his brother in arms and son at heart)

Later, when the war draws to an end, Minato is named Hokage by unanimous approval of the entire village, Obito rises to fame as one of the most powerful Uchiha seen in his generation with an activated Mangekyo Sharingan, and Rin's name is spoken across the shinobi nations as a miracle healer that will someday soon surpass her

mentors.

The Village Hidden in the Leaves is at its peak.

Konoha's Yondaime Hokage is young and legendary, supported by his devastating whirlwind of a wife and his son's godfather, Jiraiya. He is backed by two powerful students whose names are known across the lands, and the charisma of the Namikaze-Uzumaki family are enough to cement the loyalty of all the clans in the village, even somewhat taming the hostility that bres between the Uchiha and their naysayers. Tentative peace reigns as the Hokage extends treaties of cease-fires to the Five Nations and beyond, starting with the Sand, and the Sandaime Kazekage accepts the Yondaime's olive branch with their alliance succeeding mostly due to their sons who will someday outshine even them.

Kakashi, for the first time since waking up, wonders if he is still dreaming.

* * *

><p>"I never got you a gift." Obito interrupts sheepishly, a bit sadly, as if it was a confession more than an admission.<p>

Kakashi waves it off but Sharingan burning in his skull disagrees.

_A gift, a curse, details, details..._it croons.

"Actually," Rin interrupts, eyes shining with pride as she looks to Obito, and Kakashi doesn't imagine the _something_ _else_ there, "after what happened, after the war, Obito made sure the Hatake name was brought back to it's former glory."

Minato nods, ignoring Obito's protests that it wasn't only him to do it, "He was adamant that your sacrifice was not in vain and that you and your father were to be regaled as heroes for saving your comrades. After Obito activated all the stages of the Sharingan and helped on the front lines using your tanto, the Uchiha clan couldn't exactly disparage your name for saving one of their most talented doujutsu wielders twice."

He smiles proudly at Rin next, "And Rin made a name for herself as a field medic towards the end, so with her influence as a shinobi capable in both healing and combat, I was able to sway the Council's verdict on every team having a competent healer like Tsunade-sama suggested, and the decreased number of deaths have made it a requirement for any team to pass as chunin. The lower death toll gave her opinion more weight during meetings and she pointed out that if your father's team had had a proper medic, the mission wouldn't have gone so poorly."

Rin rolls her eyes but blushes anyway, touched by the Yondaime's words, adding, "And the fact that you were a genius and the Yondaime's best student certainly helped. You should've seen how scary Minato-sensei got when someone said anything bad about you or your father."

"So yeah," Obito summarizes, humble and proud at once, "since I never got you anything, I figured you at least deserved to be remembered

for the good things you did, and I always admired your dad,
soâ€| "

Kakashi doesn't know what to say.

He's always lived under his father's name (both good and bad), hasn't learned to live any other way, and only his own growing reputation has allowed him to be recognized for more than his father's title or his mistakes. To know that, at least in one world, his team had gone so far to clear the Hatake name, that his father is finally being honored for being the hero that he was and could rest in peace without waiting for his angry, bitter son to forgive him...he was speechless.

His voice is rough when he says with all the sincerity in the world,
"Thank you."

Three beaming smiles is his reply.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: Hope you guys enjoyed the chapter,
let me know what you think! :)

2. Interlude: Rin

Please enjoy!

* * *

><p>This Kakashi, Rin realizes one day, watching her boys play in the dirt like children instead of sparring like shinobi, _ is unbearably kind._

Her heart shatters at the thought.

To be fair, she hadn't known their Kakashi long enough to truly know him inside and out. After all, they were only classmates for a short time, teammates for not much longer, and she and Obito had been blinded to his character for different reasons for so long, so how can she know what their Kakashi was truly like?

But she _did_ know and knows with all her heart that their Kakashi was a broken boy. Their Kakashi was riddled with cracks she could never seal, held up and hardened by his own pride and wrapped in armor made of a cold, belittling indifference that never settled well on his young, young shoulders. Their Kakashi could be nice, when it suited him. He could be thoughtful when it came to the people close to him. Their Kakashi could be anyone he needed to be - a quiet neighbor, a good student, a reliable comrade, an incredible shinobi - but when he was stripped of expectations and scorn, he was just Kakashi, and for all that he was their precious teammate, he was not kind.

Maybe he could've been, one day, with Obito and Rin and Minato by his side to melt the ice around his heart and pull his head out of his bitter grief.

But that's neither here nor there anymore.

Their Kakashi is dead, and seeing this Kakashi, just as broken but so, so different - gently guiding an academy students hand in a kata as Obito rolls in the grass with a few others, Minato watching fondly in the background with children grabbing at the fringes of his flame-edged coat - only reminds her of that fact. She has to remind herself of it every once in awhile, because the wistful notion of _I want to keep him_ is a dangerous one.

She is a strong woman and an even stronger shinobi; she can handle heartbreak, as many times as necessary, but-

-but she doesn't think she can handle Obito or Minato's a second time.

She doesn't say a word about how this Kakashi's smile comes so freely, as hidden as it is behind his mask, or how it's as foreign to her as his easy attitude because nothing with their Kakashi was ever easy. She doesn't mention his longing looks when she catches his eyes lingering on them, watching them with a profound sadness that Rin can feel pang sympathetically in her chest, as if they are everything he could ever ask for. She doesn't tell him that when he speaks, she's reminded of someone far older, and she doesn't wonder out loud just what this Kakashi has had to survive to become so wise.

Instead, she does what she's always done - look after her boys and patch up their scrapes when they stumble. Scold them for recklessness and love them for it at the same time. Watch over them as they protect her in return.

It's all she can do when she knows, just like she knew all those years ago with his blood running like rivers through her fingers, that they can't keep Kakashi.

They are all powerful, they are all great, they are all meant for incredible things, but Kakashi's fate is far darker and far crueler - in this life and in any other. He's meant to do more than fix their broken team, something in her whispers, meant for something bigger and beyond even his father's long legacy, meant to outgrow them into something absolutely incredible and unreachable. He belongs to no one, no matter how much she or Obito or Minato wishes differently.

She thinks of this team; this Obito, laughing louder and longer than she can remember; this Minato, looking younger than he has in years; this Rin, thinking of him so fondly when for so long it was too hard to think of him at all. She thinks of Kakashi, of how he will never be buried in the village he protected so fiercely.

She thinks of another Obito, crushed to death with a missing eye and a smile on his face; another Minato, powerless and cold beside his wife and child; another Rin, stabbed through the heart by the broken boy she thought she loved. She thinks of Kakashi, all alone, grieving and grieving and grieving.

She thinks of his new team, who took the broken pieces of his shattered life and create a mosaic of someone so much happier.

She thinks of all these things, all these people she will never know and never be, and doesn't stop the tears from spilling down her face

because there is one truth that will always remain.

In any world, it seems, Kakashi isn't theirs to keep.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: Interlude set sometime later in the story; does not directly follow chapter 1. Sort of character study. Hope you guys liked it, leave a review and let me know what you thought!

3. Chapter 3

Continuing from chapter 2. Thank you for all your wonderful reviews!

* * *

><p>It's a nice day, Kakashi thinks lazily, looking up to the blue sky and drifting clouds.

The sounds of his teammates chatting nearby is a soothing balm that helps ease the ache that's always lived beneath his ribs, there but never healed. They leave him to his thoughts, don't attempt to draw him into another conversation so soon, not after so many revelations in such a short amount of time. Their understanding and consideration is more than he deserves, but he enjoys it anyway, minutes and hours slipping by as the sun sinks slowly into the horizon. He idly wonders how many responsibilities his teammates, and especially his sensei, are shirking just to sit quietly beside him, is counting the number of rules they're all breaking, but he is thankful all the same.

It gives him time to think, to process, the things not learned from his team but rather from his short side trip before he was found.

A shinobi without information is a dead one, after all, and he is too good to keep himself from perusing through some of the Hokage's restricted files while a second and third bushin slip into the library to brush up on Konoha's recent history in the short time between his jailbreak and his discovery at the Stone. All the things his team told him matched up to his bushins memories of course, a few details missing that they don't know are important and a few more added that would never be written in books, forever lost to the ages and carried far away on whispered winds.

Kakashi can feel that not all is well in this world, even if the three of his most precious people are sitting in front of him.

Even as they chat amongst themselves, content to have him near, something wrong crawls across Kakashi's skin, makes his instincts bristle and itch with restlessness. There is tension in the village, among the citizens and the shinobi, even if they don't realize it.

Kakashi thinks he knows what they're waiting for.

But first.

The wind stirs gently and Kakashi doesn't need to open his eyes to

know ANBU has arrived to collect them. Skirting the edges of his senses for the last few hours set had his teeth on edge, but he's glad to see for himself Yugao doing well behind her feline mask, even if she will never know him as more than a dead man.

"Hokage-sama, the Council has requested your presence with Hatake Kakashi."

Her even tone nearly brings a reminiscent smile to his face when he remembers her eagerness to be on his team what seemed to be a life time ago, but the memory of her silent tears at her lover's funeral is sudden and sobering.

Obito and Rin notice the shift in his mood and tense beside him while Minato is as still as calm waters, observant and quiet.

His teacher doesn't sigh as he stands and absently dusts his clothes off, looking regal and powerful even with such simple movements, but it's not hard to see how reluctant Minato is to move and break the tentative peace they've found. "Seems we've avoided this for long enough. Obito, Rin," he looks at them expectantly, eyebrow raised and mouth in a grin as if he knows exactly what they're planning with almost imperceivable forced cheer. "No eavesdropping. If you have to, you can go bother Kushina until we return, I'm sure she'd love the company and an update."

Kakashi stands as well, shaking off the melancholy that seems to cling to every thought and easily hiding the exhaustion wracking his body even as Rin eyes him suspiciously and Obito relaxes enough to pout at their exasperated Hokage.

He reassures, "I'm fine, Rin. I'm just going to stand in a corner while a few politicians talk about me like I'm not there."

It's enough to leech away the remaining tension in Rin's shoulders but Obito's not-so-subtle snickering draws a narrow-eyed glare from him. Minato's secretive smile is enough to raise his hackles a bit as well, but he shrugs it off and follows his teacher, traveling farther and farther away from their old training grounds and pretending it isn't hard to leave his two former teammates behind.

He doesn't look at the smooth, porcelain face of his once-subordinate again, takes a moment to reign in the turmoil and guilt swimming in his gut, but it's hard.

(he was the one to introduce her to Hayate)

* * *

><p>No wonder Obito looked so smug...

Kakashi doesn't really know what to expect at the Council meeting aside from the usual huffing and puffing from the older members and disinterest or belligerence from the younger, but he is unprepared to face most of his agemates on top of all of Konoha's clan heads and Minato's advisors - how they manage to get Tsunade to step foot into the village barring Naruto winning a bet against her again, he can only guess a certain redhead had a hand in it.

There are easily several dozen shinobi stuffed into the large but

claustrophobic room, and it's not a mistake that most of the jounin are stationed around the perimeter with ANBU shadowing them while Kakashi is left to face every pair of eyes staring beadily into him.

Well, at least he isn't being underestimated.

His shoulder twitches, a small movement largely overlooked, and carefully spots three ROOT agents among the stationed shinobi.

He doesn't react, however, far too used to power-plays and politics and mind games like these to let it affect him, especially Danzo's, who stares at him unflinchingly from his perch, and merely enjoys the wide-eyed stares and hushed whispers of his comrades below the humdrum of careless civilians making noise outside the tower. As quiet and discreet as they try to be, as they_ are_ in normal circumstances, Kakashi's sensitive ears can easily pick up the words passing between downturned lips.

"-spitting image of the White Fang!"

"-don't believe a word of it, it's completely ridiculou-"

"...didn't think it was true-"

"-mpossible! It's an illusion or a clever trick, surelyâ€|"

"-definitely didn't drink enough before thisâ€|"

Minato rises from his seat, long white and red cloak fluttering with the movement, and Kakashi's chest swells with pride at how an almost reverent hush falls over most of the attendees immediately. His teacher's presence fills the room, as does his warm voice, "The Council has requested a meeting with everyone here today to clarify the series of events that took place three days ago."

Kakashi would have been surprised to see Gai, Ebisu, and Anko step up to explain their mission and how they found and brought Kakashi back to Konoha, but he's already read the file and knows the events that took place.

(found unconscious just outside the Land of Fire's borders, carrying nothing but his gear with no signs of combat in the area, it was Gai who confirmed his identity - and at any age, the startling resemblance to the long dead White Fang would never change - and it was him who managed to convince his teammates to bring Kakashi back to the village bound but alive; it seems, no matter where he is, his old friend saves him again and again)

He tunes out most of Ebisu's droning voice, mind wandering back to what Minato had told him before getting to the tower.

"_I take it the Council has been kept up to date on my status?" Kakashi asks blandly, not at all looking forward to seeing that old crow Danzo or his two cohorts, Koharu and Homura. Those two had been bad enough even with Sarutobi curbing the worst of their prejudices, Kakashi doesn't want to think what they'll say now without their former teammate to settle them._

Minato nods, "For the most part, they understand the gist of the situation, but it was still a bit of a political nightmare the first day."

Kakashi raises an eyebrow, "Oh?"

_Minato shrugs, shooting a distracted smile at some civilians and waving to a few shopkeepers that manage to catch a glimpse of them moving swiftly across the rooftops. "For a while, no one knew what to do. A Konohan prodigy who died on a mission that essentially ended the Third Shinobi World War suddenly turning up sixteen years later as if he _hadn't _actually been dead all this time?_

"_So we ran all the tests we could. A biopsy was done on the Sharingan you have and matched to Obito's DNA, and everything down to the last hair matched your records; Tsunade-hime did all the examinations herself. Hiashi-san and Fugaku-san confirmed that there was no genjutsu and that your appearance wasn't some obscure, body-transformation Kekkei-Genkai, so that ruled out most subterfuge theories." He winced, "Inoichi-san and Ibiki-san did try to go through your head, which might explain your headache waking up - sorry about that by the way - and even though they couldn't get much with you unconscious, they agreed you weren't a threat." Yet._

"_So...they accepted the explanation that I'm, what, from a different world?"_

_It had taken Kakashi quite a bit of time to come to the conclusion himself, but rationality and pragmatism has never lead him astray. What was the saying? If you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. _

Besides, he's seen stranger things.

Minato looks as doubtful as he feels, "Not so much 'accepted' as 'too curious for their own good'. It's a miracle they even agreed to this, even if it's just to see and hear for themselves."

_He doesn't have to strain to hear the stress in Minato's voice. How could he not when he knows, under normal circumstances, he should've been killed or detained in T&I's basement - if not outright by Hokage's orders, then at least by the combined pressures of the Council and the Clans. How hard had Minato fought in his defense to give him this chance? _

Kakashi doesn't want to ask if his sensei has considered Orochimaru's experiments, not yet. Instead, he glances at the blonde questioningly, "And you didn't wonder if I had just survived the rockslide?"

"_Of course I did." Old hurt and even older sorrow darts across his teacher's expression and it's just another reason why Kakashi hates himself. His teachers expression clears, but Kakashi's guilt does not. "However, there were no signs of trauma due to a severe injury like the one that cru- ahem, like the one Rin described, so survival was ruled out."_

_Kakashi steers away from the topic with all the grace of Sai's typical social ability, "So a big interrogation is what they decided?"

Nosy old codgers." _

_Minato barks a laugh and gives him a wry grin, "You know how the Council likes to know everything." _

Unfortunately, Ebisu's flowery words come to an end and the spotlight is back on him.

Minato nods, turning to address him and the rest of the room. He is stern but not unkind when he instructs, "The Council and Clan Heads have questions that they would like to have addressed, and anyone may ask as long as it is relevant, appropriate, and respectful. Yamanaka Inoichi-san and Morino Ibiki-san, heads in the Torture and Interrogation Department, will be scanning your vitals and monitoring your mental state as you speak to ensure we only hear the truth. Do you agree to these conditions?"

Kakashi's voice is is just as solemn as he nods, "I do."

"Do you remember what happened to you? How you got here?" It's obvious by _'here'_ his sensei meant _this_ Konoha. Unfortunately, Kakashi doesn't, and it's disconcerting but useful.

"I have no recollection of the events that lead up to my discovery," is all he says, because it's true, and despite the suspicious disbelief that colors some of their faces, the lack of Inoichi nor Ibiki-san's disagreement tells them enough. He is telling the truth. He's sure he'll be seeing those two soon, though. Privately.

Minato nods, expecting that answer and continues, "Please state your name and rank."

"Hatake Kakashi, Jounin."

"Registration Identification number."

"009720."

"Ages of promotion."

"Genin at five, chunin at six, jounin at fourteen."

Minato raises an eyebrow.

"Technically, sensei, it's not really a promotion." Minato looks uncompromising but Kakashi can see him fighting a smile at the cheek. Kakashi relents with a sigh, "ANBU at fourteen, and ANBU captain at sixteen."

It is largely quiet up to this point, but with the revelation of his career in ANBU, the whispers kick up again. To his comrades credit, none of his former classmates look all that surprised, half probably expecting it and half too busy staring at him like a ghost.

Kakashi expects questions from the Clan Heads with Minato's allowance, but he is a bit surprised when Inuzuka Tsume, a fierce woman whom he's worked with but never talked to at length, speaks up, "How long were you in ANBU, kid?"

Kakashi's eyebrow twitches at that last bit but answers nonetheless.

"Ten years."

The whispers rise and fall once more, and this time there is more incredulity, even in Minato's expression, because while Kakashi told him he'd been in ANBU, he hadn't said a word about why or for how long.

A year in ANBU is considered average, three years a long career, and very few making it passed five years. A decade of service is an almost guaranteed death sentence, both in body and mind, especially at such a young age no matter how quickly he rose through the ranks as a child. Kakashi knows they'll start evaluating his mental state with vigor once this wretched meeting is adjourned just by the small frown now creasing Inoichi's face and the spark of something ominous in Ibiki's eyes.

It doesn't matter though. He's been through plenty of interrogations, he's suffered more torture that he likes to remember. He will only tell them what they need to know.

He's drawn back to his sensei who looks the slightest bit worried, but only to those who know him best, and is somewhat caught off-guard to see several of the non-skeptical shinobi looking at him in awe and admiration while others frown with contempt and wariness.

Ah, he thinks, _I see despite Obito's attempts at clearing my family name, there are those who still blame my father and I for the war._

It isn't a surprising thought, just a sad one. The revelation - reminder - of his genius doesn't seem to settle well with some. But, Kakashi is prepared. After all, it's only through his own rising fame that he was able to finally restore the Hatake Clan, even if it is now a clan of one. While inconvenient on some levels, he knows he use this anonymity for his own purposes - less eyes watching _Sharingan no Kakashi_ for his triumphs and failures.

Well, he amends, Jiraiya's gaze like a physical weight on his chest, _probably_.

"-come ANBU Commander?" Kakashi is only able to catch the tail end of Hiashi's question, but thankfully the man continues, as regal and cold as Kakashi remembers before the disastrous Chunin Exams, "Ten years is commendable record. Why not reach higher?"

Despite sounding like a complement to his skills, Kakashi can hear the suspicion beneath the well-spoken questions.

Kakashi's voice is cool and expression blank, "That is precisely why Hokage-sama honorably discharged me. As you pointed out, Hyuuga-sama, ten years is a long time in ANBU, especially added to a decade of service as a chunin and jounin. As we were in times of peace and knowing I have no interest in power, administrative or otherwise, he believed my skills could be used elsewhere and so I became a teacher like Minato-sensei."

That seems to quell some of the wariness coloring their expressions, and Uchiha Fugaku looks near delighted at someone talking back to the Hyuuga Head, even as discreet as it is - _you dare question me, who gave twenty five years of service to this village and died protecting

my teammates? You dare question the Hokage, his judgement of my worth, his decisions? - _but Kakashi knows the questions aren't over.

This time, the question comes from a minor clan Kakashi can't even name, "How many missions have you completed?"

More than you're qualified to know.

Kakashi inwardly sighs. With the direction these questions are going, this meeting is going to take a while, "I've completed 1,141 official missions. 197 D-rank, 190-Crank, 414 B-rank, 298 A-rank, and 42 S-rank."

Another one pipes up, "Official?"

Kakashi shrugs, "I may have completed a few missions not necessarily sanctioned by the Hokage. It all turned out okay in the end, so, mission success!"

Now there are disbelieving looks being leveled at him by his fellow jounin, some in distaste because of his attitude and most because they are trying to reconcile than man he's become with the child that he was. It's hard to remember what he was like before (mainly because he tries to forget) but everyone here has some memory of him - rigid, intelligent, and bitter beyond words. Seeing him now must be a shock; flippant and everything they think he is not.

Dead silence meets his declaration and only stretches when neither Yamanaka nor Ibiki say a word to contradict him, and he catches the way Minato tries to hide his amusement.

An whistle shatters the suffocating quiet by up-til-now silent Toad Sage and thankfully all eyes turn to him.

"Not bad, kid. Almost as good as me, the Great Jiraiya-sama!" Jiraiya bellows, laughing obnoxiously, only to have his head slammed against the tabletop by an irate Tsunade with surrounding Clan Heads barely concealing their disapproval or amusement, but it does the trick and disperses the mounting tension - just like Jiraiya probably intended.

It's a familiar scene that catches him off guard with how nostalgic it is, the mix of recognizing his students in their masters and seeing the great Sannin so lively again. While Naruto had been closer to the sage, Jiraiya had once been a good friend of Sakumo's and little Kakashi's annoying uncle, too.

The sentimental thought quickly passes when he notices the curious and deadly gleams in several eyes he can see.

He's in for a long night.

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><p>Author's Note: Just a reminder that this is an incredibly self-indulgent what-if type of fic that I am writing mostly for myself because I can never stop thinking "what if Kakashi died instead". All the events/ages/timelines are my speculations and estimations based on the rather broken story lines in both the anime

and manga, so if things clash with canon that I'm not aware of, please let me know. Thank you for all your wonderful reviews, let me know what you thought of this chapter :)

End
file.